

One Point, Two Points, Many Points

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Ajaan Lee sometimes talks about *not* being aware of the breath in the whole body. He sometimes recommends focusing on one spot and just staying right there. Some people, he says, find it too distracting to deal with the breath sensations in the different parts of the body. As you're thinking about your hand, your arm, or your leg, other thoughts related to hands, arms, and legs might sneak in and carry you off someplace else.

He compares this to starting an orchard. If you plant your whole orchard all at once, using all your resources, you may find that you've overextended yourself. You're faced with a drought for several days, the trees all die, and you end up with nothing. In cases like that, it's smarter to start out with one little area and to focus on planting just that, caring for that. Say you plant a mango tree. You care for it for a couple years, and then when they give their first crop of mangoes, you collect the seeds and plant them. The same with the second crop. That way you gradually enlarge your orchard until you fill your whole plot of land.

So if you find that focusing on the breath here and there in the beginning of the meditation gets you distracted, just focus down on one spot and stay right there. Tell yourself: You're not going anywhere else. You may want to use the word *buddho* to help keep things under control. But just use one spot in the body: It might be right between your eyes, the middle of the forehead, wherever you feel is closest to the center of your awareness in the body. You stare right down, right there.

The one warning is that you not tighten up around that spot. Think of the area as being open and free flowing. In other words, the blood can flow in, the blood can flow out. Energy flows in, energy flows out, but you are not moving. You're going to stay right here. No matter what happens, you're going to stay right in this one little spot. That can gather the mind together and keep it there. You're not trying to take care of too many things at once.

Other people find that one spot is not enough. In that case, you might want to try two spots. There was an old schoolteacher I knew who had come to meditation late in life. After she retired, she went to stay at Wat Asokaram. She found that the easiest way to get her mind down—she told me once, well before I was ordained—was to focus on two spots: one right between the eyes, the other

at the base of the spine. She'd try to keep both spots going at once. In her case, she said, it was like connecting the two poles of a battery. As soon as the two poles were connected, things lit up inside. That enabled her to get the mind into concentration really quickly.

What all this shows is that concentration is an individual matter. Different people find that their minds settle down in different ways. And there's room in the practice of concentration for you to experiment and see what works for you. There's no one ideal method that's going to suit everybody, and the whole purpose of the concentration is for the mind to settle down with something it likes, something it finds interesting.

The *iddhipada*, or bases for success, basically say that concentration will succeed by stressing one of four different qualities. For some people, it's fired by desire. For others, persistence, the energy of stick-to-it-iveness. Other people find that concentration works best when it's based on the quality of intent, when you dive in and give it your entire attention. Other people find that analysis works. It's by analyzing the breath, by making it interesting—and finding that it really is interesting, the way the breath energy flows in the body, how it can be very different from what you might expect, by playing with it, by experimenting with it—that you find yourself absorbed in the present. Not because you're forcing yourself to be there, but simply because you get interested, just as you can get absorbed, say, in painting a picture.

As a child I used to find that drawing would have me absorbed for hours. I'd be working on a drawing and I'd have no sense of the passage of time. It'd be time for dinner before I knew it. And the same can work in your meditation as you learn to analyze the breath. You pull yourself into the present moment not with any force, but simply through the power of your curiosity.

Some people, though, find that analyzing things like this gets them distracted: You start thinking about the breath, and then you start thinking about your stomach, and then about the doctor who looked after your stomach, and all of a sudden you find yourself thirty miles away. In that case your meditation may succeed based either on the desire to stay here, or the effort to stay focused on just one spot, or being intent on one spot, or on two spots, whatever you find works.

So there's room for experimentation; there's room for you to learn what works for you. Keep this in mind as you practice. Sometimes you've got to use your ingenuity. As Ajaan Fuang once noted, all the elements in really well-balanced concentration are there in the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's instructions. The problem is simply that different people will find different steps to be the ones that really pull them in. Once they've been pulled in by one of the steps, they've got to balance out the other ones.

Ajaan Lee talks about finding your one spot in the body and staying focused there, but some people miss this step because it comes after the steps that tell you to explore the breath throughout the body. But the steps don't have to be done in sequential order. Think of them as different component factors of concentration. You may have to start out with just the one spot. Once that's established, you can develop the other components. In other words, you stay focused in your one spot and then see how it's related to the area right around it. Then radiating out from there, you look at the areas right around that, until you've got the whole body in your frame of awareness, even though you're still really staring down on the one spot. You can't help but be aware of the body. In other words, you don't totally blank out the rest of the body. After all, the purpose of concentration is to be aware all around as a basis for discernment. Discernment can arise only when you're aware all around. If your concentration is the sort that blocks things out, it's not going to be a good basis for discernment. You won't see unexpected connections. You'll have huge blind spots in your range of awareness where all kinds of things can hide.

So one way to start is to go right for one spot and then gradually expand from there. But if you find that too confining, if the mind rebels against being forced into one spot, you can have it range around your body. Notice how the breath feels in the toes, how it feels in the fingers, how it feels in the arms and the back, how your posture effects the breath, how your breath effects the posture. In other words, use the meditation as an opportunity to explore.

This is one of the good things about the breath as a focal point for meditation. You can use it both as an object to stare at and as an object to analyze. If you find that the mind needs more tranquility before it's going to get anywhere, okay, you can just settle down and be very, very still. It's almost like you're not even watching the breath. You're more focused on the direction in which your awareness is beamed. You're preoccupied with just keeping the beam steady. The one danger you have to watch out for there, of course, is that you might clamp down on the blood circulation in that spot. So watch out for that. Allow things to come in and go out, but you stay at that one spot as consistently as possible.

But as for the connections you can see when you use the breath as an object for discernment, they're infinite. We were talking earlier this morning about name and form and how they play a role in the arising of suffering. Well, they also play a role in the path leading to the end of suffering. You've got form, which is the form of the body, the four great elements, and the breath is the most prominent element. You've got perception: whatever perceptions you have of the breath, whatever ways you have of conceiving the breath. That's an effective way of getting the mind to settle down: simply by holding that perception in mind.

You pay attention, which is another element of form. You've got the intention to stay. And then you've got the feeling that arises when you try to create a feeling of ease. In other words, instead of allowing these things to happen willy-nilly, you try to bring as much awareness and clarity to how they function in bringing the mind to stillness.

So these elements—which if left to their own devices based on ignorance would lead to suffering: You're now playing with them, all the while being very aware of how they interact. This is one of the best ways of learning their interactions: by playing with them. You adjust your attention or your intention and see what happens to the feeling. You change your perception, and see what effect it has on the mind.

What we're doing is to take the basic causes of suffering and to bring as much awareness to them as possible—specifically awareness in the form of the four noble truths: Where is there stress, what are you doing that's causing stress, and what can you change to make the stress go away? You start with blatant levels of stress related to how you're sitting here breathing, trying to get the mind to settle down. And then from there, you grow sensitive to levels that are more and more subtle.

You're here right where all the action is. It's simply a matter for you individually to figure out exactly where you can get your first handle on these issues. Establish that as your beachhead, and then from there your understanding will begin to spread out. There will come times in the meditation when you begin to think that just being very still right here is kind of stupid. Nothing is going to happen. And you wonder what else is there to do next. Well, ask yourself: Who says that it's stupid? Why do you need to push the "what's next"? Those are perceptions right there. Right there you've got some issues you can work through.

Everything you need to know for the purpose of putting an end to suffering is right here. Just bring a lot of alertness to it. A lot of mindfulness to it. And notice what works for you in getting the mind to settle down. That's how insight arises, by seeing what works. That's the way the Buddha tested all of his insights: Did they work? In other words, he was looking for pragmatic truth, the knowledge that would make a difference. As for truths that wouldn't make a difference, he just put them aside. He was very single-minded in his quest. Whatever was necessary for putting an end to suffering, he focused on that. Whatever wasn't necessary, he might know it but he didn't let it clutter up his mind.

As he said in describing his Awakening, he learned the equivalent of the leaves of the forest. What he brought out to teach—in terms of focusing on the issue of suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end: That's just like a

handful of leaves. But it's precisely the handful you need. If you were to make a comparison with medicine, there can be lots of medicine in the forest, but just this one handful is what you need for your specific disease. As for the other leaves, if they're not helpful for your disease, why bother with them right now? The mind has this disease of ignorance, craving, greed, anger and delusion. And if we don't take care of it, it's going to fester, going to cause a lot of suffering for a long time to come. So focus on the leaves that will cure it. As for the other leaves in the forest, you can pay attention to them after you've got this specific disease cured.

So everything you need to know is right here. It's simply a matter of paying attention. See which perceptions work, which perceptions don't work, which ways of paying attention work, and which ones don't, which intentions work, and which don't. Just by exploring these issues, you can learn an awful lot about the mind—and make a big change in the mind as well.